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Magic in Art, Poetry, and Biography

Marjorie Cameron's Illustrated Notebooks c. 1956–1964

Manon Hedenborg White | ORCID: 0000-0002-7383-9857
Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden
manon.hedenborg-white@mau.se

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Abstract

The article analyzes four works of poetry and illustration produced by the artist, poet, and occultist Marjorie Cameron (1922–1995) in the 1950s and 1960s. Widow of rocket scientist and occultist John "Jack" Whiteside Parsons (1914–1952), an early follower of Aleister Crowley's (1875–1947) religion Thelema, Cameron was also a friend and collaborator of Beat artist Wallace Berman (1926–1976) and avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger (1927–2023). In the 1950s and 1960s, Cameron delved deeply into Crowley's magical writings alongside those of comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987). The article especially highlights how Cameron creatively adapted and re-worked the ideas of both thinkers in her artistic interpretations of her Holy Guardian Angel. A core argument of the article is that art, poetry, and esotericism were intertwined pursuits for Cameron, and that extra-textual sources (e.g., letters and biographical details) contemporary with the analyzed creative works are helpful in untangling their meaning.

Keywords

Marjorie Cameron – Aleister Crowley – Thelema – esotericism – Joseph Campbell – Hero's journey

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1 Introduction

In recent years, important steps have been taken to highlight the work of a number of women esoteric artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[1] The 2022 Venice Biennale drew its title, "Milk of Dreams," from a book by British-Mexican Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), and featured a capsule exhibition, "The Witch's Cradle," which showcased a selection of works by Carrington alongside those of other pioneering women Surrealists who drew on occult influences in their work, such as Remedios Varo (1908–1963), Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012), Leonor Fini (1907–1996), and Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988). Recent years have also witnessed increasing recognition of another important twentieth-century artist, poet, and occultist: Marjorie Cameron (1922–1995), known by her mononym Cameron.[2] A collaborator of filmmakers Kenneth Anger (b. 1927) and Curtis Harrington (1926–2007), and mentor to younger artists and poets such as Wallace Berman (1926–1976), George Herms (b. 1935), David Meltzer (1937–2016), and Aya (Tarlow, 1932–2016), Cameron was also an adherent of Thelema, the religion founded by the British magus and poet Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).

Despite the increasing recognition of Cameron's work in the fine arts world, academic scholarship on her artistic output and esoteric beliefs and practices is scarce.[3] In scholarship on Western esotericism, Cameron is mainly known for her participation in the "Babalon Working," a ritual magical operation conducted in 1946 by her lover and future husband John "Jack" Whiteside Parsons (1914–1952) with the aid of L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), future founder of the Church of Scientology. However, little is known of how her esoteric

1 E.g., British painter and poet Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988); British artist and spiritualist medium Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884); Swiss artist Emma Kunz (1892–1963); and—perhaps most noticeably—Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944).

2 Though Cameron eschewed the commercial art world for most of her life, she was the subject of the retrospective "Pearl of Reprisal" at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery in 1989. Selected works by Cameron were also shown in the 1995 exhibition "Beat Culture and the New American" at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the traveling exhibition "Semina Culture" devoted to Wallace Berman and his circle in 2005–2007; and at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in New York City in 2007. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) exhibition "Cameron: Songs for the Witch Woman" (October 11, 2014–January 18, 2015), named after a collaborative collection of Cameron's illustrations and Parsons's poetry, was the first major retrospective of her work since 1989.

3 To my knowledge, the only previous academic exploration of Cameron's esotericism is found in Manon Hedenborg White, "From Chorazin to Carcosa: Fiction-Based Esotericism in the Black Pilgrimage of Jack Parsons and Cameron", *LIR Journal* 12 (2020): 58 ff., in which I briefly discuss Cameron's illustrated poem "Black Pilgrimage", also analyzed in the present article.

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beliefs and practices developed in the years after Parsons's death. One possible explanation for this is that Cameron left relatively few writings and eschewed formalized esoteric orders. This poses a challenge in interpreting her body of work.

In this article, I will analyze four works of poetry and illustration produced by Cameron from the late 1950s through early 1960s. A crucial argument I will seek to make is that art, poetry, and esotericism were intertwined pursuits for Cameron, who used her creativity to make sense of her magical experiences as much as the latter provided inspiration for her artistic *oeuvre*. Through this study, I hope to further the understanding of an important yet underrecognized artist of the twentieth century, indirectly adding to the growing literature on women esotericists. In the context of this special issue, I seek to advance understandings of how Crowley's legacy developed outside of formalized Thelemic orders in the twentieth century. Finally, this article contributes to the understanding of occult influences on the Beat movement, with which Cameron was associated, although her work is starkly different from that of her associates within the movement, such as Wallace Berman or collagist Robert "Baza" Alexander (1923–1987).

2 Background

Marjorie Cameron was born on April 22, 1922, in Belle Plaine, Iowa. A cartographer for the U.S. Navy during WWII, she was honourably discharged after going AWOL to visit her brother, who had returned injured from the war. After WWII, she relocated to Pasadena, California, where she worked as a fashion illustrator.[4] In 1945, she paid her first visit to the headquarters of Agape Lodge, a local body of the initiatory society Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), housed in a stately mansion on 1003 South Orange Grove Ave.[5] The house was owned by John "Jack" Whiteside Parsons, an autodidact rocket scientist and follower of Crowley's, who served as master of Agape Lodge.[6] Cameron and Parsons locked eyes but did not interact at the time.[7]

4 Cameron's life is the subject of a biography by journalist Spencer Kansa, see *Wormwood Star: The Magickal Life of Marjorie Cameron*, 2nd ed.

5 For the history of the Agape Lodge, see Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown Good: W.T. Smith and the Thelemites*.

6 For the details of Parsons's biography and involvement with early rocketry, see George Pendle, *Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons*.

7 Cameron, transcript of interview by William Breeze, OTO Archives.

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Established in the early twentieth century by the German socialist and singer Theodor Reuss (1855–1923), OTO claimed to possess the key to all masonic and Hermetic systems: sexual magic.[8] Following Reuss's death in 1923, Crowley assumed international headship of the order.[9] In 1898, Crowley had been initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, arguably the most influential ritual magical order of the *fin-de-siècle*, which synthesized many pre-existing esoteric systems in a series of graded initiations corresponding to the kabbalistic Tree of Life. Though Crowley's career in the order ended in 1900, the Golden Dawn system would continue to exert a formative influence on his own approach to magic.

In 1904 in Cairo, Egypt, Crowley was visited by a discarnate entity named Aiwass, who dictated a text to Crowley over the course of three days.[10] Crowley referred to this text as *The Book of the Law, Liber L vel Legis* and, later, *Liber AL vel Legis. The Book of the Law* proclaimed the advent of a new age, with Crowley as its prophet, which was to be characterized by the tenets: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law," and the related: "Love is the law, love under will."[11] *The Book of the Law* became the foundational sacred text of Crowley's religion Thelema (Greek for "will").[12]

Crowley's system of "Magick" was based on a combination of ceremonial magic in the style of the Golden Dawn and yogic techniques with study of what Crowley termed the Holy Books of Thelema. Like the Golden Dawn, Crowley's initiatory order A.·.A.·. (which he co-founded in 1907) follows a degree structure based on the Tree of Life.[13] In the Adeptus Minor grade ($5^{\circ}=6^{\square}$), corresponding to the sixth *sephirah* Tiphereth (beauty), the Adept achieves full awareness of his or her true will through an ecstatic experience known as the "Knowl-

8 Theodor Reuss, ed. *I.N.R.I./Jubilaeums-Ausgabe Der Oriflamme*, 21.

9 For a brief history of OTO, see e.g., Manon Hedenborg White, "Ordo Templi Orientis", *World Religions and Spiritualities Project*, ed. David G. Bromley. *Wrldrels.org*, https://wrldrels.org/2022/04/09/ordo-templi-orientis/. The early history of the order is detailed in Richard Kaczynski, *Forgotten Templars: The Untold Origins of Ordo Templi Orientis*.

10 Crowley's recollection of his reception of the text and the events leading up to it can be found in Aleister Crowley, "The Temple of Solomon the King VII", *The Equinox* I: 7, 355–400. See also Aleister Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods*.

11 AL I:40; I:57. See Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law: Liber Al vel Legis: With a Facsimile of the Manuscript as Received by Aleister and Rose Edith Crowley on April 8, 9, 10, 1904. E.v. Centennial Edition*.

12 For an overview of Crowley's Thelema, see Henrik Bogdan, "Aleister Crowley. A Prophet for the Modern Age," in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge, 293–302.

13 For an overview of the degree structure of A.·.A.·., see Crowley, "One Star in Sight," in Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 229–244.

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edge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel."[14] A discussion of Crowley's method for achieving this magical benchmark and how it developed over time exceeds the scope of this article. However, it is worth mentioning here that Crowley successfully attained this experience in 1906 using the so-called "Preliminary" or "Bornless Invocation," an edited translation of a fourth-century exorcism first published in English in 1852. Crowley would later teach a modified, Thelemic version of this invocation to his disciples as a method for attaining the Knowledge and Conversation.[15]

The knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel represents one of two fundamental initiatory transformations in Crowley's system of magic.[16] The second of these is the so-called crossing of the Abyss, which—if successful—precipitates attainment of the degree of Magister Templi ($8^{\circ}=3^{\square}$). In Crowley's system, the Abyss connotes a void of horror and delusion separating the three "supernal" *sephiroth* Kether (crown), Chokmah (wisdom), and Binah (understanding) from the lower seven, and corresponds to the separation between the numinous and the manifest. To accomplish this ordeal, Crowley taught that the Adept must annihilate their ego, becoming utterly receptive to all of existence. In Crowley's writings, this process is described as a form of initiatory death and rebirth, metaphorically described as draining one's blood into the golden cup of the goddess Babalon. One of the most important deities within Thelema, Babalon represents ecstatic, non-discriminate union with all and the sacredness of liberated (and especially, female or feminine) sexuality.[17] Crowley also describes the crossing of the Abyss in erotic terms, likening the loss of individuality to the experience of union with one's lover.[18]

14 See e.g., Crowley, "One Star in Sight," 238ff. Originating in the seventeenth-century grimoire *The Sacred Book of Abra-Melin the Mage*, the Holy Guardian Angel in the Golden Dawn system was identified with the magician's "higher self" or "Divine Genius." For an in-depth analysis of this notion in Crowley's magical system, see Henrik Bogdan, "Ars Congressus Cum Daemone: Aleister Crowley and the Knowledge and Conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel", *Entangled Religions* 14:3.

15 Aleister Crowley, "Liber Samekh. Theurgia Goetia Summa (Congressus Cum Daemone) sub figura DCCC", in Aleister Crowley, *Magick: Liber ABA*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta, 504–529. Cf. Bogdan, "Ars Congressus Cum Daemone."

16 Cf. Bogdan, "Ars Congressus Cum Daemone."

17 For an analysis of the goddess Babalon in Crowley's writings as well as those of his later followers up until the present day, see Manon Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism*.

18 Crowley's ceremonial crossing of the Abyss in 1909 is described in Aleister Crowley, *The Vision and the Voice with Commentary and Other Papers: The Equinox, Volume IV Number II*, ed. Hymenaeus Beta. It has been analyzed from the perspective of Edwardian subjectivity by historian Alex Owen in *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of*

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Early in 1946, Cameron returned to 1003 South Orange Grove Avenue, wishing to rent a room.[19] Parsons saw her arrival as auspicious. Aided by his friend L. Ron Hubbard, also a resident at 1003, Parsons was embroiled in a series of ritual operations aimed at manifesting a female magical partner, the incarnation of an elemental spirit; what he referred to as an "elemental," with whom he intended to conduct more advanced magical experiments.[20] Parsons viewed Cameron as his elemental materialized. They became lovers, spending the next few weeks together in bed.[21]

Parsons perceived the beginnings of his love affair with Cameron as the next step in a larger magical operation, the so-called "Babalon Working," through which he aimed to cause the goddess Babalon to incarnate on earth.[22] Parsons believed Babalon would arrive as a champion of love and liberty, freeing humanity from authoritarianism and sexual repression. Parsons eventually proclaimed the operations a success, and that Babalon was now incarnate on earth, though he never clearly indicated her human identity (at least not in any surviving sources).[23] At the time of the Babalon Working, Cameron was uninterested in magic, and initially perceived hers and Parsons's love affair as a mundane one.[24] As will become apparent below, however, her views would change radically.

Following the completion of the "Babalon Working," Parsons resigned as master of Agape Lodge, sold the house in Pasadena, and moved into a house in Manhattan Beach with Cameron.[25] They were married later that year. Over the following years, Cameron periodically dwelt abroad, mainly in the artistic haven of San Miguel de Allende in central Mexico. During her periods of

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the Modern, 186–220. I have analyzed Crowley's notion of the Abyss ordeal and its relation to gender and the goddess Babalon in Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*, 50–51; 54–58; 65–70.

19 Cameron, interview by William Breeze, OTO Archives; Kansa, *Wormwood Star*, 30–31.

20 The term "elemental" refers to the idea of a person embodying some sort of natural force. Parsons appears to have derived this idea from the confidential grade papers pertaining to OTO's VIII°. See John W. Parsons, "Of Familiars," n.d. Yorke, Warburg Institute; Aleister Crowley, "De Nuptiis Secretis Deorum Cum Hominibus," n.d., Yorke OS25, Warburg Institute.

21 John W. Parsons, "The Book of Babalon," 1946, Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.

22 John W. Parsons, "The Book of Babalon," 1946, Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.

23 For scholarly analyses of the Babalon Working, see Henrik Bogdan, "The Babalon Working 1946: L. Ron Hubbard, John Whiteside Parsons, and the Practice of Enochian Magic", *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 63:1 (2016): 12–32; and Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*, 127–148.

24 Cameron, interview by William Breeze, OTO Archives.

25 Pendle, *Strange Angel*, 266–270.

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absence, Parsons began instructing her in magic.[26] His letters frequently referenced mythology, and Parsons recommended a new work by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987): *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).[27] As we shall see below, Campbell's influential notion of the "monomyth" or "hero's journey" became a touchstone for Cameron. Parsons also encouraged Cameron to explore Enochian and Goetic magic and instructed her in invocation and astral projection.[28] By spring of 1952, Cameron and Parsons were once again living together in Pasadena, and Cameron began exploring astral projection during this period.[29]

Jack Parsons died on June 16, 1952, in the aftermath of an explosion in his home laboratory. Following the accident, Cameron departed for Mexico. There, she conducted her first magical ritual with the Canadian spiritualist Nancy Patterson.[30] It is significant that, years later, she also claimed to have performed the "Bornless Ritual" (most likely a reference to the above-mentioned "Bornless Invocation," used and taught by Crowley as a method for invoking the Holy Guardian Angel) during this time, while staying in Mexico.[31] After returning to the US, she settled with her pet bird and her German Shepherd, Freya, in an abandoned ranch in Beaumont, California, which she described to her friend, Jane Wolfe (1875–1958) as a "wind beaten, boulder strewn wasteland."[32] Cameron had contacted Wolfe at Parsons's behest. Wolfe had been a founding member of the Agape Lodge and a long-term friend and disciple of Crowley's. She had resided with Crowley at the Abbey of Thelema which Crowley operated in Cefalù, Sicily, during the 1920s. Wolfe appears to have functioned as something of a magical mentor for Cameron in the years after Parsons's death.[33]

Following Parsons's death, Cameron appears to have begun, for the first time, to study her late husband's papers from the "Babalon Working."[34] Her letters to Wolfe shed some light on her magical practices during this time. Cameron describes performing frequent Enochian invocations and orchestrating a series

26 John W. Parsons to Cameron, transcript of letters 1949–1950, Cameron Parsons Foundation.

27 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

28 John W. Parsons to Cameron, letters [transcribed], January 15–16, 1950; February 1, 1950, Cameron Parsons Foundation.

29 Cameron, interview by William Breeze, OTO Archives.

30 Cameron, interview by William Breeze, OTO Archives.

31 Cameron to Gerald J. Yorke, June 30, 1962, copy of typescript, OTO Archives.

32 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, December 15, 1952, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

33 E.g., Cameron to Jane Wolfe, March 5, 1953, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

34 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, December 26, 1952, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation; Cameron to Gerald J. Yorke, June 30, 1962, copy of typescript, OTO Archives.

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of sex magical experiments pairing white women with men of colour with the aim of producing a magical child, which she referred to as "wormwood star."[35] Cameron came to believe herself the magical daughter of Crowley and his lover and magical disciple Leah Hirsig (1883–1975).[36] During this period, Cameron was also seeking her Holy Guardian Angel. In spring 1953, Cameron described undergoing an ordeal of self-discovery, writing to Wolfe:

> [P]ain is discovery of self—which literally kills or cures. This is the poison apple of Paradise … [T]hat which I fear in myself is my mighty will—since I know that it will go to terrifying lengths … I feel that this ground is the shell thin covering over a bottomless abyss that threatens to swallow me screaming into horror—and that nothing holds me from this doom—but the sheer determination of my will. Oh Jane—I know that your love is with me—but none can help me in this hour but my guardian angel.[37]

An undated horoscope Cameron drew for herself from the same period attests to her interest in Crowley's Thelema as well as in astrology, explicitly referencing the experience of the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel as her primary spiritual goal:

> It might be a good thing to apply the law of "Do what thou wilt" to the other person. The thou can be interpreted as meaning other people. It is the greatest benediction one can give another soul. Also, the Thou can be capitalized and addressed to the Holy Guardian Angel. The greatest lesson Saturn and Jupiter have to teach in the house of friends, hopes and wishes, is that friends and their benefits come because the Angel has desired it to be so, and not because the native has exerted power over them and their lives. / There is a great need to detach the ego from the affairs of this house … Always she will discover that her power must be channeled into seeking the "knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel." Should she gain this in spite of the pitfalls of self-delusion and misuse of

35 E.g., Cameron to Jane Wolfe, December 26, January 8, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

36 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, December 15, 1952, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation; Cameron to Gerald J. Yorke, June 30, 1962, copy of typescript, OTO Archives. For a discussion of Leah Hirsig's role in Thelema, see Manon Hedenborg White, "Proximal Authority: The Changing Role of Leah Hirsig in Aleister Crowley's Thelema, 1919–1930," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 21:1, 69–93.

37 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, March 5, 1953, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

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> power and sex and drugs, etc., she will come out on the other side of the horrible experiences and be able to weld the whole of her life into a great and creative expression.

In 1954, Cameron starred as the Scarlet Woman in Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, having been introduced to Anger by her friend, the Austrian artist Renate Druks (1921–2007).[38] Cameron and Anger's friendship was intense and turbulent; they connected over his fascination with her life story and their shared interest in Crowley's work, and lived together periodically.[39] In December 1955, Cameron gave birth to a daughter—Crystal Eve. In the ensuing years, Cameron achieved iconic status in the Los Angeles artistic avantgarde. A close friend of the influential Beat artist Wallace Berman, Cameron appeared on the cover of the inaugural issue of Berman's journal *Semina* in 1955. In 1957, Cameron's erotic drawing "Peyote Vision" caused the LAPD to raid Berman's exhibition at the Ferus Gallery and arrest Berman himself. Following these events, both Cameron and Berman withdrew from the commercial art scene. In autumn 1957, Cameron moved to San Francisco, eventually marrying WWII veteran Sheridan "Sherry" Kimmel (1925–1966) in 1959. Cameron returned to Los Angeles in 1961 and would remain within its metropolitan area until her death in 1995.

3 Sources and Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Below, I will analyze four of Cameron's works of poetry and illustration, referred to herein as "Anatomy of Madness," "Prince Arindal," "Azrael," and "Black Pilgrimage" (analyzed in this order).[40] Despite a number of complicating factors including differences in genre and degree of completion (I will discuss these challenges further in a subsequent section), they represent the most substantial (partly) written works left by Cameron outside of personal correspondence,

38 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, undated, typescript, Cameron Parsons Foundation.

39 Cameron and Kenneth Anger, letters, OTO Archives.

40 My analysis centres on the following sources: Cameron, "Anatomy of Madness", holograph poem with illustrations, c. 1956, Cameron Parsons Foundation; Cameron, "Prince Arindal Artist Sketch Book", c. 1961–1965, Cameron Parsons Foundation; Cameron, "Azrael", poem in sketchbook, n.d., Cameron Parsons Foundation; Cameron, *Black Pilgrimage* (Press Baza, 1964), in the archive of the Cameron Parsons Foundation. As the works are unpaged, I will reference the title of the work discussed in the main text, and employ footnotes when discussing extra-textual sources such as letters, biographical information, or possible sources of influences outside of Cameron's own work.

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and exhibit clear thematic parallels, motivating me to consider them as a coherent body of work. The works were also likely produced relatively close together in time. "Anatomy of Madness" was printed in *Semina* in 1956 and thus appears to be the earliest. "Prince Arindal" was seemingly produced between 1960–1964, with "Black Pilgrimage" likely produced between 1957 and 1964. Azrael is dated by day and month, but not year, but shows sufficient stylistic similarities to the other works to suggest it was produced during the same period. I have studied the notebooks in two stages: first separately, then together, looking both for similarities and differences, and attempted to trace core themes and terms using other relevant works by Cameron as well as those she indicates as influences.

Until the twentieth century, biographical perspectives dominated literary analysis, with scholars assuming the author's experiences are essential to understanding a text. During the twentieth century, this notion received criticism from several academic movements which were critical of tendencies to "translate" creative works into biographical elements, as well as to read creative works through the lens of biography. Adherents of "New Criticism" advocated the idea of the closed text, and semiotician Ronald Barthes in 1967 famously declared the "death of the author."[41] From feminist perspectives, a turn away from the authorial figure has been seen as a departure from problematic tendencies to read women's writings as personal outpourings.[42] Similar critiques have been levelled at tendencies in art criticism to view the work of women artists and poets as "narrowly confessional and autobiographical," or as "ingenuous, artless, concerned with [women's] inner emotional lives."[43]

Conversely, however, feminist (as well as postcolonial) interventions have also prompted new interest in the authorial figure, with feminist scholars arguing gender difference *does matter* for the analysis of poetry and art.[44] It has been suggested that erasure of the artists' subjectivity, which may have seemed a radical move for male creatives, can be considered less so for female artists and writers, "for whom erasure was almost a given."[45] Gender constructions

41 For a summary of these developments, see e.g., Péter Hajdu, "The Death and Revival of the Author," *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art* 34:4, 172–181.

42 E.g., Gunilla Domellöf, *I oss är en mångfald levande: Karin Boye som kritiker och prosamodernist*; Lisbeth Larsson, *Sanning och konsekvens: Marika Stiernstedt, Ludvig Nordström och de biografiska berättelserna*.

43 E.g., Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *The Art Bulletin* 82:1, 154; Mary Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho," in *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, eds. Ellen Greene and Joseph Paxton, 26–34.

44 Cf. Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho."

45 Chave, "Minimalism and Biography"; cf. Lisbeth Larsson 2001.

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continue to influence how artists and art are exhibited and received: in reviews, catalogues, news media, and scholarly analysis.[46]

In my analysis of Cameron's work, I am inspired by scholarship that takes the authorial figure into account while being wary of biographical reductionism, and emphasizing how biographical elements, studied critically, may shed light on artistic and literary production. An artist's or author's biography does not provide a definitive key to her work. While she may draw inspiration from her life, any creative rendition is inevitably shaped by its cultural and historical context. Nonetheless, when a certain theme (e.g., the Holy Guardian Angel) recurs in sources external to the artistic work, biographical interpretation and careful analysis of "extra-textual" sources such as letters and diaries may nonetheless be warranted. As I aim to understand Cameron's esotericism as linked to her art and poetry, my approach differs from that of traditional literary or visual analysis.

4 Cameron's Illustrated Notebooks

4.1 *Anatomy of Madness*

"Anatomy of Madness" is a work of prose poetry interspersed with illustrations in black, red, and brown ink on white and brown paper. The illustrations show intricate line work and are mostly non-figurative, with a few exceptions. Much of the poem is addressed to an unidentified other, as illustrated by the opening lines: "It's forever changing face—and fading in and out—but I have realized the most astounding truth about you—you are the totality" (fig. 1). The narrator describes a sense of "burning necessity" and being driven through "misery" and "deadly annihilation" until finally finding herself "in the landscape of your STAR." This mysterious other appears simultaneously as lover, paternal figure, and destroyer, as illustrated by the lines: "Born from your brain—bathed in the fountain of your heart—dissolved [?] in your bowels and violated by your phallus that conceived me long ago."

The relationship between the narrator and the other appears fraught, as reflected in lines such as: "I have surpassed the tomb you dreamed for me," and "I am not your God—though I know your God. I might have given myself over to your bloody business, but I no longer have the appetite for your apple." If the narrative voice is that of Cameron herself, they suggest her disillusion-

46 Sigrid Schade, "The Biographical Exhibition as a Problem of Feminist Critique and the Case of the Exhibition Marlene Dumas—Female, 2005", *OnCurating.org 29* (2016): 54–63.

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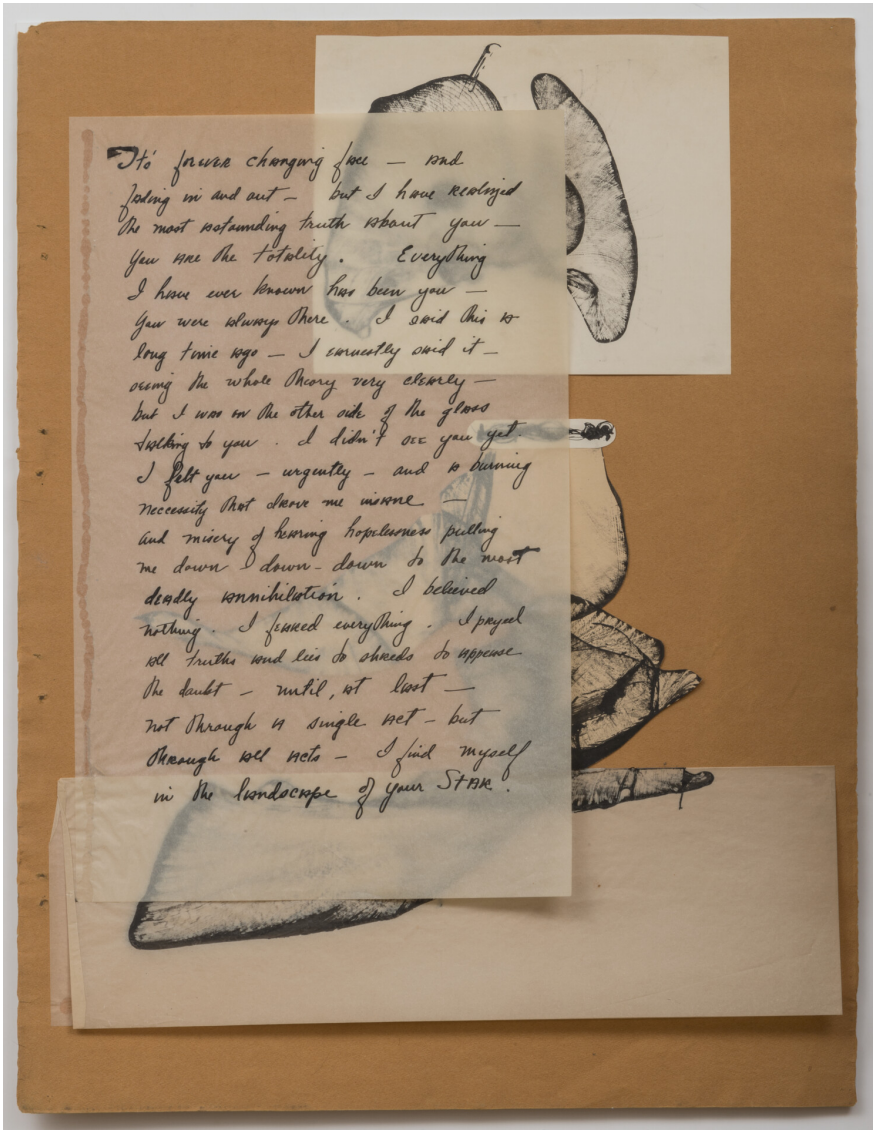
It's forever changing face — and
fading in and out — but I have realized
the most astounding truth about you —
You are the totality. Everything
I have ever known has been you —
You were always there. I said this a
long time ago — I correctly said it —
seeing the whole theory very clearly —
but I was on the other side of the glass
looking to you. I didn't see you yet.
I felt you — urgently — and in burning
necessity that drove me insane —
and misery of burning hopelessness pulling
me down & down - down to the most
deadly annihilation. I believed
nothing. I feared everything. I prayed
all truths and lies to shreds to appease
the doubt — until, at last —
not through a single act - but
through all acts — I find myself
in the landscape of your STAR.

FIGURE 1 From Cameron, "Anatomy of Madness," c. 1956
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ment with some cause to which she was previously committed. The reference to a fatherlike figure (as suggested by the indication of a phallus by which she was "conceived") may suggest Crowley himself—Cameron, as noted above, came to believe herself his magical daughter. Alternatively, these lines could be interpreted as references to Parsons—Cameron appears, periodically, to have

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believed herself spawned by his elemental conjurations. The interpretation that the poem may partly reference Parsons is enhanced by the lines:

> I am the worm that violated your tomb and left it stinking in the sun—I am filled with self-loathing for having gutted myself so long upon your heart—your heart—your precious well of passion praying for a winged purity—I am that dream of wings—I am the larvae of a flight into the light—but all thy praying will not make thee the moth that soars from the shouded cacoon [*sic*] of your scarlet life.

The above excerpt suggests a conflict between the narrator and the other, and an ambivalent striving for transformation, expressed through the metaphor of chrysalis—the larva cocooning and growing wings, soaring heavenward as a moth. The worm recurs as metaphor throughout the poem, seemingly symbolizing both violation and spiritual search. The poem describes how the worm "lusts for the spirit"; how the spirit "becomes light of worms"; and how "[f]lesh is a fortress against the invasion of the worm", suggesting an almost gnostic view of flesh as a hindrance towards the spiritual impulse, while "the sensory organs" provide a conduit for initiatory transformation.

The mention of "scarlet" in the above excerpt may imply the Scarlet Woman, human avatar of the goddess Babalon and thus, implicitly, the Babalon Working. While it is tempting to read the work as related to Parsons, his ritual operation, and Crowley—such a reading draws on aspects of Cameron's life and magical career that are relatively well-known and well-chronicled—I am cautious of this interpretation and find it equally plausible that the poem refers primarily to Cameron's own magical experiences, such as the search for the Holy Guardian Angel. Indeed, *Wormwood Star* (1956), Curtis Harrington's tribute to Cameron as artist and occultist, is sub-titled "Concerning the knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel as revealed to Cameron."[47] The movie was filmed in Cameron's studio, the same year "Anatomy" appeared in *Semina*.

4.2 *Prince Arindal*

As noted above, the notebook I am here referring to as "Prince Arindal" appears to represent an unfinished work, and thus it is probably the most challenging to interpret here. Contained in a spiral-bound notebook of approximately 400

47 *Wormwood Star: Concerning the knowledge and conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel as revealed to Cameron*, dir. Curtis Harrington, 1956.

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pages, its dated entries span from October 22, 1960 to June 21, 1964. The notebook comprises poetry fragments, diary entries, and a letter draft, as well as illustrations in watercolour, ink, and pencil. While many of the images show fantastical beings, often in surreal landscapes, others are non-figurative. It is unclear whether there is any logic to the order of the images or their placement relative to the text. However, the first 13 images—drawings in ink and watercolour—form a sequence that appears to represent a deliberately composed story or narrative.

The notebook is untitled, and the working title used herein is derived from the heading of a typescript inserted between the cover and the first page. Its namesake is the protagonist of the German composer Richard Wagner's (1813–1883) first completed opera, *Die Feen* (Eng., "The Fairies," 1834). *Die Feen* revolves around the love story of the human Prince Arindal and the fairy princess Ada. Ada renounces her immortality to be with Arindal, incurring the wrath of her father, the fairy king. The king decrees the lovers can be together only on the condition that Arindal undergo a series of trials, and that he never doubts Ada's devotion. If Arindal fails, Ada will be turned to stone. After a series of tribulations Wagner's version of the tale ends happily; Arindal rescues Ada and they are both granted immortality, after which they live happily ever after. Contrary to Wagner's version, the brief typescript summary of the Arindal story included in the notebook ends unhappily. Rather than remaining steadfast in his faith, Arindal doubts Ada. A "terrible thunderclap" is heard, and Ada and the fairy kingdom vanish, as Arindal and his hunter awaken in "an empty stone landscape."

The typescript gives no indication of authorship, however, its inclusion—as well as its marked plot differences compared to Wagner's original—is worth noting. It is plausible the alternate version, which I have not found in any other source, is of Cameron's own design. While Cameron's motivations for being interested in this story are unknown, it is possible she felt the heterosexual and wedding-related imagery resonated with some of her own beliefs about initiatory transformation, and I will return to this below. The subsequent, sequenced images also appear loosely linked to this story, and are preceded by a blank page decorated only with the word "Beginning." The first image shows a winged and crowned figure, its back towards the viewer, following a solitary path towards a black and blue structure. The next image reveals this to be a strikingly blue peacock encased behind black bars (fig. 2). A subsequent image shows another anthropomorphic figure dressed in a tattered, black robe (fig. 3). Facing the viewer, its arms are outstretched, long-fingered hands turned skyward. Its face obscured, the figure appears to be horned (or crowned with a horned headdress), the black silhouette offset by a golden halo. Another image shows what

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FIGURE 2 From Cameron, "Prince Arindal Artist Sketchbook," c. 1961–1965
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FIGURE 3 From Cameron, "Prince Arindal Artist Sketchbook," c. 1961–1965
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appears to be a human figure with red hair and wearing a short black dress, seemingly turned towards a gateway or portal.

Several of the succeeding images show humanoid figures: a naked, seemingly female figure kneeling, her head and torso covered by her flowing, black hair; a young girl, naked beneath a billowing cloak, traversing a solitary road, a spiky tower looming in the background; an androgynous being draped in shadow; another figure has the appearance of an adult woman, her nakedness visible through a translucent cape, standing alone, with some sort of spire or tower in the distant background.

The final two images show humanlike faces, traced in black and overlayed with gold; the first (fig. 4) has carved, masculine features; a chiselled jawline, and low-set brows. The eye sockets are empty and black, and the face is crowned with a strange headdress. The neck has a roughly hewn appearance, giving the impression of a statue in a desolate landscape. In the distant background, an indistinct structure in black casts long shadows. The thirteenth image (fig. 5), completing the sequence, shows a second face of more ordinary appearance, also silhouetted in black overlayed with gold. Its eyes are open and stare directly at the viewer. The gender of this face is ambiguous. The features are masculine, but more delicate than those of the preceding image; the jawline is soft, the lips full. The eyes are open, and the hair is luscious and black, cropped in a short style around the face. However, the golden overlay suggests flowing, feminine locks, implying a gendered ambiguity. While these images are challenging to interpret, the use of gold lacquer to highlight the latter two portraits may provide a clue, which I will return to below.

Following this initial sequence, the journal holds together loosely, and I have been unable to uncover any clear structure. Immediately following the sequenced images is a diary entry, dated October 22, 1960, beginning "I sense the approaching end to my years of exile." The following spread displays something akin to a poetic meditation, overlayed over a non-figurative watercolour composition in black and yellow. The script, which is not dated, begins:

> In the total love of one man woman becomes adulterous. And yet there is that something else. He is composed of all that you are not. In the beginning it was stated that I was a bigamist. In defence of this I stand. Somehow I may find the riddle concluded and peace will return. He the cup bearer who tasted the wine of the secret sacrament and became drunken upon its power and found himself in the coils of this marriage bed with [?]. *Write for myself* I must.

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FIGURE 4 From Cameron, "Prince Arindal Artist Sketchbook," c. 1961–1965
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FIGURE 5 From Cameron, "Prince Arindal Artist Sketchbook," c. 1961–1965
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This passage, like many of the written pieces in the journal, eludes easy interpretation. It is not dated as a diary entry, and as such it may be more prudent to view it as an artistic statement rather than as a personal reflection of Cameron's experience. However, it is worth noting a recurring theme within the work, namely, gendered or sexual metaphors linked to notions of personal transformation. In the above, a woman's male partner is suggested as a representation of "all that [she] is not." It is possible to read this passage as an implicit reference to the Jungian notion of *animus*—a woman's inner, masculine side which appears as the mirror image of her conscious female persona.[48]

An essential component of the journal is a draft of a letter to Joseph Campbell, dated October 3rd, 1961. In the letter, Cameron refers to Campbell's most famous work, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Stressing the importance of his ideas for her own worldview, Cameron suggests Campbell's book had been her near-constant companion for a decade. Cameron indeed appears to have embraced myth as a key resource for initiation; on August 23, 1953, Cameron wrote to Jane Wolfe of an illustrated edition of *Cupid and Psyche*, contending that myths represent "the real archive of the human race," continuing: "[W]hen conscious mind and the unconscious mind synchronize—the legendary adventure becomes the real, concrete present." "[P]erhaps," she mused, "these incredible maps of the plights of gods are in truth, the only guide signs for the hero who ventures out beyond safer regions."[49]

The reference to the hero as early as 1953 indicates Cameron's long-term interest in Campbell's most well-known argument, which will here briefly be traced. Campbell was strongly inspired by Jung's notion of archetypes; images imprinted in the collective unconscious and manifesting themselves in myth, folk tales, and legend.[50] For Jung, the hero represented an aspirational figure who triumphs through ordeal.[51] In a similar vein, Campbell argued myths express a sort of universal grammar of the imagination. Behind the seeming disparities of different myths, Campbell argued there is a universal narrative structure reflected in the mythologies of the world, which he referred to as the "monomyth" or the "hero's journey." The hero's journey represents a transfor-

48 See e.g., C.G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Bollingen, 1959), 11 ff.

49 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, August 23, 1953, holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

50 Jung first used the term "archetype" in his paper "Instinct and the Unconscious" (1919), presented at the Joint Meeting of the British Psychological Society, the Aristotelian Society, and the *Mind* Association, in London, July 12.

51 E.g. C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis to the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia*, 2nd ed., 171 ff.; 306 ff.

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mation; a metaphorical death and rebirth, akin to a rite of passage. The hero ventures out into the unknown, encountering various guardians, temptations, ordeals, and supernatural occurrences along the way. By overcoming a series of challenges, the hero is able to transcend his (or her, as Campbell stresses a hero can equally well be female) social programming, gain access to universal wisdom, and successfully return to act as a teacher or agent of the common good.[52] Campbell emphasizes that the hero's journey is a journey "inward" as much as outward and discusses the destruction of the mundane ego as a part of this voyage.[53] Cameron's letter to Campbell is worth quoting at some length:

> Mr Joseph Campbell,
>
> For the space of nearly ten years I have carried your book "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" with me, and this long after I have left behind most loved objects, home and former friends … During this time it has been prevailing intention [sic] of contacting you and somehow making you aware that there exists in the contemporary world this hero phenomenon of which you speak … Undoubtedly, there has been a knowing undercurrent in your teachings, that inevitably, the force would venture forth again renewed from a common need … I have returned from the heroic voyage and it is my desire, though I may be motivated by sentimentality, to bring the evidence into your hands.

Campbell responded enthusiastically the following year, describing going through Cameron's records "over and over; enjoying them, each round, with new discoveries, and always marveling at the little shock of enchantment that each one emitted, each time."[54] It is worth noting that Cameron describes herself as one who has successfully undertaken the "heroic voyage." Her precise understanding of the significance of this voyage, and its end result, is not clearly given in the letter draft, and indeed Cameron writes that she will wait to send the detailed records of her journey until receiving an indication of interest from her correspondent. However, her personal understanding of the hero's journey is suggested by two subsequent diary entries, the first beginning on the following page of the notebook. Dated October 21, 1961, it begins:

52 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces, passim*.

53 E.g., Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 99–100, 225.

54 Joseph Campbell to Cameron, qtd. in Yael Lipschutz, "Beacon in the Darkness: The Transcendental Art of Cameron," in *Cameron: Songs for the Witch Woman*, ed. Yael Lipschutz, 15.

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> She who was woman rising from the sea in the hour when the warrior's heart was thrown upon the wave. Invoked from the matrix of the world she grew in heavy sorrow from the vanquished hero's breast and the seed of the warrior father rooted in her flesh … [C]all thy sire from beyond the stars to rise and slay the mother whose nourishment has fermented bitter wine. We shall cast her back into that primordial sea from whence she rose henceforth to find the spectral memory of her in the wind blowing after us in fields of stars.

The subsequent entry, dated the following day, provides further indication, and is also worth quoting at some length:

> I have emerged from the mother-woman self into that long awaited reunion with the Angel. For knowing that the Angel is the transcendent self, still I did not anticipate it being in my image! Though I destroyed the warrior image following the discovery that the self contains both sexes and its total to infinite search for its beloved wherein the dual manifestation of itself, I had not divined that the angel, inviolate was myself and one day would emerge in the likeness of the hero self that first set out upon the journey to reach fulfilment in total communion with the guardian angel. The hero, now with total experience of the female self, emerges reborn in her death, or total surrender and discovers itself to be the inviolate angel himself, who was not, after all, a fixed absolute waiting at the end; the goal—but the end result of the hero transcendent.

This entry, in which Cameron explicitly references her search for the Holy Guardian Angel, shows how she drew on Campbell's hero notion to make sense of this idea. Again, Cameron appears to understand initiatory transformation in gendered terms. In striving towards her Angel, she feels she has passed through and destroyed her "warrior image" or "warrior's heart," but both excerpts also allude to a mother persona that has been subsumed or transcended. Both excerpts emphasize a motif of death and rebirth in the striving for the Angel. However, Cameron also appears to imply the journey's goal entails a recognition that the Angel is not an external constant waiting at the end of the road, but the "end result" of the journey—in other words, the fully realized hero.

Cameron seems, at least based on the above, to have understood the search for the Holy Guardian Angel as the discovery and realization of opposite-gendered aspects within her psyche. This again recalls the Jungian notions of *anima* and *animus*—and indeed it seems likely that Jung was also a source of

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inspiration for Cameron.[55] However, this idea also reflects themes in Crowley's writings.[56] Significantly, in a commentary to "Liber Cordis Cincti Serpente vel LXV" (1907), a Holy Book of Thelema that explores the relationship between the Adept and the Holy Guardian Angel, Crowley suggests only those may understand who have gone "beyond the fundamental opposition of the sexes," continuing: "The male must have completed himself and become androgyne; the female and become gynander."[57]

Cameron's gendered description of her search for the Holy Guardian Angel also recalls another portion of Campbell's work on the hero. According to Campbell, an essential stage of the hero's journey is the "Meeting with the goddess," who represents the totality of knowledge or the promise of happiness. If this meeting is successful, it culminates in a mystic marriage. Campbell stresses that the hero need not be a man and that a female hero will instead encounter her divine husband.[58] This idea may provide a clue to Cameron's pessimistic rendition of the Arindal story—does it describe a failed "meeting with the goddess"? While Cameron does not explicitly indicate the mystic marriage anywhere in the notebook, the marriage metaphors in the undated poetry fragment cited above may also shed light on Cameron's understanding of her search for the Angel.

Though produced somewhat later, Cameron's painting "The Holy Guardian Angel According to Aleister Crowley" (1966, fig. 6) is of relevance to the present discussion. The painting shows a crowned and winged figure of seemingly feminine gender. The figure gazes directly at the viewer, arms outstretched, bearing a cup or grail in its left hand with what appears to be a root or fruit sprouting three golden leaves in its right hand. Seven rays converge around the Angel's crowned head. The painting is rendered in black casein and gold lacquer, with the name "Adonai Ha-Aretz" rendered in red Hebrew lettering. The golden hue and rays surrounding the figure seem to connote the sun, considered to be

55 Several works by Jung can be found in Cameron's personal library, e.g., *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* (1972), *Four Archetypes* (1973), *Man and His Symbols* (1969), and *On the Nature of the Psyche* (1973).

56 Crowley construed spiritual advancement in terms of gender inversion or harmonization of gendered opposites within the self in several important works. See e.g., Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, 45; Aleister Crowley, *Liber Aleph vel CXI; The Book of Wisdom or Folly in the Form of an Epistle of 666, The Great Wild Beast, to his Son 777, being The Equinox Volume III No. VI*, 152.

57 Aleister Crowley, *Commentaries to the Holy Books and Other Papers*, 202–203. The notion of spiritual androgyny is prefigured in several earlier esoteric sources. See e.g. Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, 109 ff.

58 Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 100 ff.

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FIGURE 6 From Cameron, "The Holy Guardian Angel According to Aleister Crowley," 1966
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the astrological correspondence of the *sephirah* Tiphereth, associated with the Holy Guardian Angel.

Cameron's painting seems to follow an earlier work by Crowley, described in an instalment of "The Temple of Solomon the King." Published in Crowley's periodical *The Equinox* in 1910, it describes how Crowley in 1900 sought to invoke the Holy Guardian Angel through the use of a talisman. Crowley describes the talismanic image as follows:

> A winged crown radiating white brilliance … The head and neck of a beautiful woman with a stern and fixed expression, and hair long dark and waving … The arms and hands, which are bare and strong, stretched out to the right and left at right angles to the body, in the left hand a gold cup and in right ears of ripe corn. From her shoulders dark spreading wings … A deep yellow-green robe, upon the breast of which is a square gold lamen decorated with four scarlet Greek crosses. Round her waist is a broad gold belt upon which in scarlet letters is written the name [Adonai Ha-Aretz] … Her feet are flesh coloured, and she wears golden sandals. Her long yellow-green drapery is rayed with olive, and beneath her feet roll black clouds lit with lurid patches of colour.[59]

An illustration by Crowley's disciple John Frederick Charles Fuller (1878–1966), also a military strategist and historian, matching the above description, is included in Crowley's record.[60] Cameron's image features a stronger usage of the colour gold. Her use of golden lacquer for a work explicitly linked to the Holy Guardian Angel may provide clues as to the significance of the two portraits at the end of the initial image sequence in Prince Arindal. These images, rendered in the same golden hue, may similarly have been intended as versions of the Holy Guardian Angel.

4.3 *Azrael*

The lyrical portion of "Azrael" is written on 24 parchment pages, written in ink on rectos only and bound in red leather. There appear to be accompanying illustrations in a separate notebook. For the present study, it has only been possible to analyze the lyrical portion. The title, "Azrael," connotes the angel of Death in some Jewish and Islamic traditions. As mentioned above, "Azrael" takes the

59 Aleister Crowley, "The Temple of Solomon the King, IV," *The Equinox* I: 4, 113–114. My thanks are due to William Breeze for making me aware of this connection.

60 Ibid., 114. It is possible that Fuller's illustration followed an earlier version by Crowley, though this cannot presently be confirmed.

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form of a sort of diary with brief entries dated by month and day (though not year). The individual entries, twenty-two in total, range from April 17 to September 21. Their surreal imagery suggest they may have been inspired by dreams or astral visions, though no description of the production process has survived. The first entry reads:

> This black wood gleaming and dreaming pale blooms and glistning [*sic*] with drops of a maiden's weeping where nightbirds carried her from her virgin sleeping sinister birds flown from the lust of a dead man's thinking snaring the pearl of her tender dreaming. / And far in the wake of a sea of sand enchanted by voices of stones and wind he seeks his name and his nameless child in phantoms of flowers buried therein. / And I who am mother and lover of both disciple of death and daughter of dreams spawn of the hawk and the cave of the world am destined to brew the healing cup to awaken love from the deadly spell.

Several of the entries refer to an unidentified, male other. Cameron writes that "[H]is leather coat is sewn with pearls his shirt is stained with dragon's blood and golden stones about his throat thus charmed he floats in his lunar boat and plots the death of the sun." As seen in the previous excerpt, eroticism and death are intertwined throughout the work, as is also illustrated by the description of a "valley where death sleeps with white moths on every flowered bough and birds of the burning dying sun ensnare our looks of love." Another entry reads: "With gloves of antelope he strokes my [throat?] and sinks his jeweled tounge [*sic*] into the wound that moans for peace." These expressions of erotic desire are mingled with melancholia and loss, as is also suggested by a later entry:

> We two longing for that kiss that blends the hours into bridges for the special [*sic*] sea where birds of death follow our wake in the scent of our love and the sound of our sighing—bound together in the fatal wave—back to back and Janus-faced—we die to touch—we two as one—and thus we ring the earth with outward visioning.

There are multiple references to a kingly being; it is stated "the king will come no more," also that "[w]e enter here in the ancient oak and take blessing thrice upon our heads in benediction from each kingly hand to wrap our shoulders round with furs of animals." As seen from the last excerpt, the entries suggest an enchanted view of the natural world—also suggested by lines such as "The rose is wedded unto the tree—the rose tree grown by an ancient hand." However, to speak with Tennyson, this natural world is certainly "red in tooth and

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claw."[61] A sense of loss or doom looms heavy over the landscape. The king reappears in an entry dated May 25:

> It is long since the King stood upon this hill and viewed the sunken city of Abiegnus. Silver horns ascribe the boundaries of his kingdom and carpets adorn the streets for she has walked here and never placed her foot upon the earth. / The fortress is surmounted by an iron trident that supports a whirling golden disk that rips the wind and runs the arrows of the sun into the stars. / Here we feasted on our hearts and drunken upon the nuptial cup we danced a thousand nights of lust beneath a sea of grief.

It is worth calling attention to the phrase "the sunken city of Abiegnus." Deriving from the Latin *abiēs* (silver fir) and the suffix *-gnus* (origin), the term Abiegnus was used in the Golden Dawn Adeptus Minor ritual in reference to the Rosicrucian mountain of initiation, the symbolic resting place of Christian Rosenkreutz.[62] Crowley also used the term Abiegnus in reference to the Holy Guardian Angel. In the short story "The Wake World"—an allegorical tale of initiatory ascent up the Tree of Life centring on a young girl, Lola, who is deeply in love with her Holy Guardian Angel, whom she calls her "Fairy Prince"—the "Sixth house" (i.e., *Tiphereth*) is described as located in "a mountain called Mount Abiegnus."[63] Crowley also indirectly links the term to a separate, yet equally as important magical transformation: the crossing of the Abyss, associated with passage into the *sephirah* Binah and attainment of the degree of Magister Templi.[64]

As seen above, many of the entries are addressed directly to an unknown other, who may be a human lover, a spiritual entity, or both. The narrative voice and the other whom she addresses appear bound by desire as much as by violence, as indicated by the proclamation: "I shall slay thee again and again to drink the anguish in thine eyes and rape the living flame within." Several passages also refer in the third person to a male, unknown other who may be dead, unborn, or simply confined to some unreachable dimension. Sleep and death blend together in several of the excerpts. The final entry reads:

61 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, 80.

62 An abridged version of the Adeptus Minor ritual can be found in Aleister Crowley, "The Temple of Solomon the King", *The Equinox* I: 3, 208–223.

63 Aleister Crowley, "The Wake World," in Aleister Crowley, *Konx Om Pax: Essays in Light, Facsimile Edition with an Introduction by Martin P. Starr*, 15.

64 Aleister Crowley, 'Liber Cheth vel Vallum Abiegni sub figura CLVI,' *The Equinox* 1:6, 23–27.

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> Now gentle husband bind the limbs that grew from blood and stone and grass and make a bed from scented earth in which to sleep and pray. / The secret heat that burned the blood gave birth to worlds in unknown seas and cells of light within the shell of mindless searching in the night spawned suns upon those frozen shores.

The above reference to a "gentle husband" is ambiguous, especially given the difficulty of dating "Azrael" as a whole. It is possibly a reference to Cameron's first husband, Jack Parsons, or—if the work was produced after 1959—to her second husband, "Sherry" Kimmel. It may equally be interpreted in light of the recurring, wedding-related imagery utilized by Cameron in reference to the Holy Guardian Angel—and thus the "husband" may indeed be a reference to the Angel. However, these interpretations are not mutually exclusive and it is quite possible several figures—both human and metaphysical—inspired the depiction of the male other(s) in "Azrael."

The entries in "Azrael" do not adhere to a linear narrative, but nonetheless hold together loosely through the descriptions of desire, loss, and violence against the backdrop of an enchanted natural world where hillsides contain hidden tombs, silver horns mark the boundaries of kingly realms, and trees stretch and shrink beneath whirling skies. The difficulty of determining the time of production also further complicates interpretation of the work. The second-person form and the intertwining of erotic and violent verbal imagery overlaps to some extent with "Anatomy." However, the haunted landscape and tomblike motifs parallel with the final work I will analyze herein: "Black Pilgrimage," the focus of the subsequent section.

4.4 *Black Pilgrimage*

"Black Pilgrimage" was published in 1964, though it may have been produced earlier.[65] It comprises 17 un-numbered pages, lithographed in black and red on rectos only, comb-bound with a colour pastedown and hand-written title on the cover. It was published in a limited edition by Press Baza, the imprint of Cameron's friend Robert "Baza" Alexander, a collagist, assemblage artist, and mail-order priest closely linked to Wallace Berman and the *Semina* circle, in

65 The description "Illustrated prose poem by Cameron, 'Migration', 1957 (excerpt)", is written in the hand of Kenneth Anger on the adverse side of a loose photocopy of one of the pages from "Black Pilgrimage" kept in the Yorke Collection, suggesting the work (or parts of it) may have been produced as much as seven years prior to publication, and perhaps originally bore a different title. NS 74, Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.

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1964. In 1960, Baza and Berman co-founded the artistic community and non-denominational ministry Temple of Man, which functioned as a hub for Beat artists, writers, and musicians.

Cameron's poem begins, ominously: "I am at your door / How else begin a song of death that swung / A full cycle into the sun / and homeward / through the howling night?" (fig. 7). The narrative voice is that of a scarred and weary traveler in rusted garments, who longingly watches an unidentified, second-person other "from the edge / of your woods / scenting the / sweet fires of / forgotten life." The narrator journeys, with a fellowship of dead priests through "stellar webs to darker worlds within the Lunar mirrors of suicide," to the frozen shores of a wintery sea, scattered with petrified serpents' eggs marked with hieroglyphs. The traveller arrives at a tomb amidst "Black palaces of glass" where she "entice[s] the mad one from his throne," adorning him with a glass coronet. She finds herself upraised through "glorified grief of love" by an "angel standing on the tomb." The poem concludes with the lines: "Godhood walks on Burning Snow Inflamed with fatale[*sic*] perfumes of a flower's frozen fire." The accompanying ink drawings appear deceptively simple, though closer scrutiny reveals layers of symbols within the drawings. Many indicate winged or crowned humanoid figures of unclear gender, wearing sweeping robes. In several of the drawings, large, black eyes are hidden within Cameron's intricate lines. One illustration appears to show a severed female head within a circle, and others show twisting, vertically stretching silhouettes that may represent either trees or towers. The pages of the original manuscript are spattered with droplets of red ink, suggesting blood.

The title, "Black Pilgrimage," recalls two works by Parsons—"The Book of Antichrist" (published in 1980) and the unpublished magical diary "The Black Pilgrimage"—both of which depict an initiatory ordeal he underwent in 1948.[66] Parsons describes this as an astral journey to the cursed ruins of Chorazin—a real-world location overlooking the Sea of Galilee—and a subsequent initiatory ordeal: the crossing of the Abyss.[67] It is unclear whether Cameron's poem is meant to describe a singular magical ordeal, and it is possible it represents a

66 For the purposes of this article, I have relied on John W. Parsons, "The Book of Antichrist," n.d. [c. 1948], typescript, Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute; John W. Parsons, "The Black Pilgrimage", n.d. [1948], copy of holograph MS., OTO Archives. "The Book of Antichrist" has been published as John W. Parsons, *The Manifesto of the Antichrist/The Book of Antichrist*, ed. Eugene Plawiuk. My thanks are due to Henrik Bogdan for making me aware of this version of the text.

67 Manon Hedenborg White, "From Chorazin to Carcosa: Fiction-Based Esotericism in the Black Pilgrimage of Jack Parsons and Cameron," *LIR journal* 12, 57 f.

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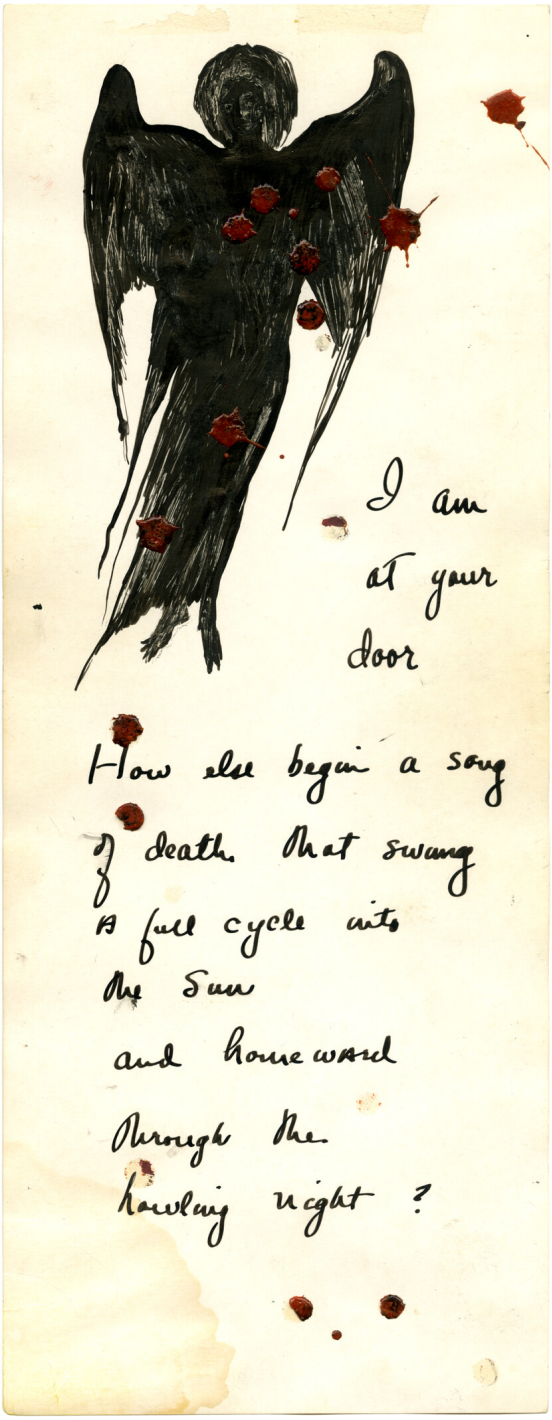

FIGURE 7
From Cameron, *Black Pilgrimage* (Press Baza, 1964)
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condensed account of experiences undergone over a longer period. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume Cameron's use of the specific and obscure term black pilgrimage was deliberate.

Elsewhere, I have argued that Parsons refigured this notion of crossing the Abyss in his own way, drawing on elements of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic horror. There are clear differences between Parsons's and Cameron's respective works—Parsons's writings are relatively straightforward descriptions, indicating ritual magical procedure and terminology, while Cameron's lyrical rendition contains no clear documentation of any ritual procedure. However, as I have argued, there are clear thematic overlaps—both Cameron's and Parsons's respective black pilgrimages are described in terms of mingled euphoria and horror; themes that recur in many of Cameron's other writings from the 1950s–1960s.[68]

5 Discussion

As noted in the introduction, several factors complicate analysis of Cameron's illustrated notebooks. Firstly, Cameron left scant writings describing her artistic production methods nor how she intended her work to be interpreted. It is unclear whether the notebooks represent inspired or channelled art, or whether the illustrations and lyrical descriptions of entities or landscapes represented dreams or astral visions Cameron had herself experienced. While the dreamlike and surreal quality of the images combined with the fact that Cameron experienced strong visual hallucinations from childhood renders it likely many of her works were inspired by such states, it is unclear whether this applies to the works analyzed in this article.[69] Secondly, though it is possible to identify a roughly eight-year timespan during which most or all of the

68 I have previously analyzed the literary influences on Parsons' black pilgrimage, as well as its link to Cameron's work of the same title, suggesting an influence from *fin-de-siècle* horror and weird fiction writers such as M.R. James, Ambrose Bierce, and R.W. Chambers, in Manon Hedenborg White, "From Chorazin to Carcosa: Fiction-Based Esotericism in the Black Pilgrimage of Jack Parsons and Cameron," *LIR journal* 12, 53–73. Since completion of the aforementioned article I have found that a 1970 edition of R.W. Chambers' short-story collection *The King in Yellow* (Dover, 1970) was in Cameron's possession at the time of her death, as well as a copy of Ambrose Bierce's *Ghost and Horror Stories* (Dover, 1964). See Cameron Parsons Archive inventory list, "Bibliography (Published Works)." Though these editions postdate Cameron's "Black Pilgrimage," the presence of these as well as works by other authors of horror and weird fiction in Cameron's personal library lend support to this interpretation.

69 Kansa, *Wormwood Star*, 15.

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works discussed were produced, the precise chronology is unclear. Thirdly, they differ in genre and degree of completeness. "Prince Arindal" contains a mixture of genres and appears to represent a work (or several works) in progress, with words erased or crossed out and several visible corrections and alterations. Cameron may not have intended it to be read as a coherent work—quite possibly, she did not intend most of it to be read at all (with the obvious exception of the Campbell letter). By contrast, "Black Pilgrimage" and "Anatomy of Madness" were published by Cameron's close friends during her lifetime, and it is reasonable to infer she saw these as completed works capable of standing on their own. Though Azrael does not appear to have been published, the stylized, symmetrical writing—rendered without corrections—gives the impression of a completed work that may have undergone authorial editing.

While the sources analyzed in this article clearly illustrate Cameron's interest in the Holy Guardian Angel, they shed little light on her concrete practices for seeking the Knowledge and Conversation, nor for the crossing of the Abyss, beyond a few sparse references to Enochian and Goetic magic, the Bornless Invocation, and astral projection. There are many remaining question marks in Cameron's biography and work that complicate analysis. Nonetheless, as I have attempted to show, the illustrated notebooks exhibit a degree of thematic coherence, also linking to artworks and letters produced both before and after the time period in focus, and thus I propose these works may tell us something of their creator's esoteric beliefs.

"Arindal" provides several explicit clues: namely, the draft letter to Joseph Campbell and the repeated references to the hero and the Holy Guardian Angel. As Cameron herself attested to, she only developed an interest in magic towards the end of Parsons's life and did not conduct any formalized rituals until after his death. However, Crowley's magical system appears to have become one of Cameron's main sources of inspiration. In her personal library, preserved after her death, Crowley is by far the most well-represented author.[70] Though Cameron eschewed formalized magical orders (her sex magical experiments of 1952–1953 appear to represent an exception in her magical practice, which seems mostly to have taken a solitary form), her interpretation of Crowley's teachings was likely shaped in dialogue with other Thelemites, such as Jane Wolfe and Kenneth Anger. Cameron also clearly applied her own creativity and innovation to Thelema, juxtaposing Crowley's initiatory teachings with elements of fairy tale and mythology. As I have argued above, Cameron interpreted the hero's journey as linked to the search for the Holy Guardian

70 Cameron Parsons Archive inventory list, "Bibliography (Published Works)".

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Angel. Similar to Crowley's writings around the Holy Guardian Angel, erotic language and wedding-related imagery recurs in Cameron's treatments of this theme.[71] As I have argued elsewhere, Crowley frequently wrote about his own Holy Guardian Angel in what may be considered a queer manner—in the sense of disrupting normative ideas of (hetero)sexuality.[72] The theme of gender transcendence recurs in Cameron's reflections on the Angel, though there are also resemblances to Jung's notions of *anima* and *animus* that suggest his work may have been an additional source of inspiration for Cameron.

As noted in the introduction, Cameron was not herself a part of the Surrealist movement, though there are clear parallels between her *oeuvre* and that of female Surrealist painters such as Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Leonor Fini, and Ithell Colquhoun in the emphasis on magic, dreams, and the unconscious as wellsprings of artistic inspiration. According to art historian Victoria Ferentinou, artists such as those above felt the occult represented a more egalitarian worldview than normative Christianity, offering a forum for negotiating or reinventing cultural concepts of femininity, including in the "male-defined artistic domain," often through "resurrection" of an ancient, woman-centric world as well as "Goddess-related material."[73] Cameron operated within an artistic domain that was quite as male-dominated as that of Surrealism: the Beat movement.[74] However, I am wary of reading Cameron's engagement with Thelema or other forms of esotericism as primarily motivated by a search for egalitarian empowerment simply because she was a woman. Though Cameron clearly challenged normative ideas of womanhood in 1950s and 1960s America—eschewing nuclear family life for most of her life, supporting herself as an artist, taking numerous lovers, and cultivating her persona as an esotericist—I maintain that an understanding of Cameron's esoteric interests and how they intersected with her creative output requires taking both seriously. Indeed, Cameron's visual artworks do not primarily emphasize specifically feminine entities, nor a utopian vision of an egalitarian world. Instead, they show a disorganized and melancholy cosmos populated by mysterious beings of frequently ambiguous gender.

71 E.g., Crowley, "The Wake World,"; Aleister Crowley, 'Liber DCLXXI vel Pyramidos: A Ritual of Self-Initiation Based Upon the Formula of the Neophyte,' in Aleister Crowley, *Commentaries on the Holy Books and Other Papers. The Equinox, Volume Four, Number One*, 59–72.

72 Cf. Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*, 50; 95–96; 110.

73 Victoria Ferentinou, "Surrealism, Occulture and Gender: Women Artists, Power and Occultism," *Aries* 13, 110–111.

74 Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, 174.

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6 Conclusion

As Cameron left relatively few clues as to how to interpret her work, the temptation of a biographical reading looms large; for instance, reading any allusion to grief or suffering as references to the loss of her husband, Jack. While it is likely Cameron's personal loss did inspire both artistic and esoteric exploration, I feel it is particularly urgent here to consider the danger of reductionism in relation to historiographical gender bias. In both criticism and scholarship, men's creative output has more often been considered as intellectually coherent and universal, often the result of a sophisticated system of thought that requires meticulous decoding and analysis, whereas women's art and writings have more often been seen as instinctive and autobiographical, and thus as being of lesser value.[75]

At the same time, Cameron's eschewal of the commercial art world and tendency to stay out of the public spotlight complicates interpretation of the works discussed herein as public statements, dislocated from personal experience. Cameron also situated herself decisively within an esoteric current in which the personal and the textual often intertwined. For instance, Crowley operationalized the magical diary as a document both personal and communal (magical diaries were shared and discussed by disciple and teacher, and sometimes between disciples), deliberately utilized literary fiction as a vehicle for transmitting his esoteric ideas, and communicated similar themes in both poetry and magical writings.[76] Moreover, Crowley repeatedly wrote about his own life in the third person.[77] Parsons himself adopted this model in the autobiographical essay "Analysis by a Master of the Temple" (c. 1948).[78] In Cameron's own work, a similar style is found in a horoscope she drew for herself and sent to Jane Wolfe, also written in the third person.[79]

While reducing the artistic to the personal risks minimizing the value of an artist's work, I suggest the idea of the text or work as something separate from

75 Cf. Edda Manga, *Gudomliga uppenbarelser och demoniska samlag*.

76 E.g., Aleister Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*. I have previously indicated thematic overlaps between Crowley's poetry written around 1900 and his later magical writings on the goddess Babalon, see Hedenborg White, *The Eloquent Blood*, 39 ff., 83, 91.

77 For instance, Crowley's "autohagiography" *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* contains a biographical exposition in the third person. Crowley, *Confessions*, 35–53. Crowley describes that his memories up until the death of his father Edward Crowley appear "strangely impersonal," and that it was only from this point he began "to think of himself in the first person." Crowley, *Confessions*, 53.

78 John W. Parsons, "Analysis by a Master of the Temple," in Parsons, "The Book of Babalon," Yorke Collection, Warburg Institute.

79 Cameron to Jane Wolfe, n.d., holograph MS., Cameron Parsons Foundation.

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the artist's biography may inadvertently reproduce an ideological conception of the atomized creator—stable, static, and separate—rather than the creative self as something that is dynamic and subject to continuous re-negotiation. As indicated by Cameron's insistence on the spiritual value of myth, and how union of the conscious and unconscious could cause myth to come alive, she appears to have felt strongly that the personal echoed the universal. For Cameron herself, her search for the Holy Guardian Angel held salience beyond her subjective experience—in fact, she suggested that it manifested a universal mythological grammar, and thus that it should be of interest to the person Cameron considered a prime authority on the subject: Joseph Campbell. While it is indisputable that Cameron, a talented artist and poet, made aesthetic decisions about how to express and present her ideas, it is reasonable to think extra-textual sources such as letters and biographical information are helpful in interpreting her creative output and conversely, that her art and poetry shed light on her personal meaning-making.

In undertaking this inquiry, I have aimed to contribute to the understanding of an important avant-garde artist of the twentieth century. Indirectly, this article also contributes to the growing literature on women esotericists, and to the importance of both women and occultism in Beat culture. As suggested by Amy Hale, a possible explanation for the relative under-representation of research on women in the academic study of Western esotericism is the tendency of the field to privilege philological approaches and learned writings, whereas many esotericist women have chosen other venues than writing for their thought and engagement or have acted as (often uncredited) collaborators or ghost-writers for their male partners.[80] While not entirely sufficient as an explanation, the larger and more accessible body of writing left by Cameron's late husband Jack Parsons is likely part of the reason why there is more research on him in the study of Western esotericism, and in this article I have sought to develop a working model for understanding Cameron's *oeuvre* in the absence of a clear roadmap. Finally, Cameron exemplifies how twentieth-century Thelema not only developed within formalized initiatory orders such as Ordo Templi Orientis or A.∴A.∴, but was also practiced and re-interpreted by esotericists operating alone or through more informal networks of practitioners. Though Cameron left few writings that are studied by Thelemites today, her collaborations with other creatives such as Kenneth Anger, Curtis Harrington, and the circles around Wallace Berman warrant recognition, and merit further study, as alternative conduits for Thelemic culture.

80 Amy Hale, "Introduction," in *Essays on Women in Western Esotericism: Beyond Sea Priestesses and Seeresses*, xx.

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